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Being a Foster Parent

This chapter is designed to give you an overview of what is generally expected of foster parents and of situations that you may encounter. Information discussed in this chapter does not replace the expectations set forth in licensing standards or policies established by your licensing agency. In fact in some instances your licensing agency may have very specific policies surrounding topic areas and it is always helpful to consult your foster care coordinator if something is unclear.

Throughout this book we want to continue to recognize how challenging and rewarding foster parenting can be. Remember as you read through all that is expected of you, that you are a remarkable person for being willing to take on this challenge and contribute to the success of a child, their family and the betterment of our communities

CONFIDENTIALITY

We all have information we share within our family that we would not necessarily want strangers to know about. When children and families become part of the child welfare system a lot of their private family information, no longer remains just within their family. There are laws that protect a family's private information and only those who need to know the information will have access to it. This is essentially the definition of confidentiality.

As a foster parent you must respect the confidentiality of children in foster care and their families. Information about a child placed in your home or that child's family **CAN NOT** be discussed with your friends, neighbors, relatives, professionals, or others who are not specifically authorized to receive the information. Anyone receiving information must do so **via a signed consent to release information.**

Confidential information includes information and documents provided by the court, tribe, child welfare agency, the child, the child's birth family, and the foster parents. It may be about the family background of the child, the child and family medical history or diagnoses, services being provided to the child or family, and many other things.

There are several reasons you should respect confidentiality

- ❖ Federal law, state law, and foster home licensing standards require that foster parents keep information about children and their families confidential.
- ❖ Respecting confidentiality helps build relationships with the child and the child's family.
- ❖ Keeping the child and family's information confidential demonstrates respect for the family and its history

Agencies must have written consent from the legal guardian in order to allow foster parents to release information about or related to the child. Typically the child's legal guardian is the child's parent, but in some cases it may be a different person. The child's case worker is generally the person responsible for obtaining and maintaining current consents or authorizations.

When you are asked about the child's background, you should reply that you cannot discuss it with others. You may also choose to introduce the child to other people by first name only. It is important to remind all family members in your home that they cannot talk about confidential information about children in foster care or their families.

In addition to keeping written or verbal information confidential, children in foster care cannot be photographed or interviewed by newspaper, radio, or television reporters without written permission from the guardian. You cannot talk to any media person about the child. If you have questions or someone wants information about the child, do not provide any information and contact the child's case worker for more information.

Since federal law, state law, and foster home licensing standards require that foster parents and other people in the home keep information about the child and the child's family confidential, the illegal sharing of a child's confidential information by a foster parent could result in revocation of a foster home license.

For more information about confidentiality requirements in foster home licensing standards, see section 56.09 (12).

Communication

Open and ongoing communication between foster parents, the case worker, birth parents and any other professionals involved with children in foster care are key to achieving positive outcomes for families and children. That doesn't mean that everyone will always agree. In order to be successful, everyone needs to understand what is going on and, within the bounds of confidentiality, why things are happening the way they are.

Information to be Communicated to Foster Parents:

You need to know the child's situation and what might be the best ways of helping the child feel comfortable in your home. The case worker will give the foster parents as much information as they know about a foster child on the Information to Foster Parents, Part A and B, form. You can and should use the Information to Foster Parent form to record ongoing information that you learn about the child.

As a foster parent, you can expect to receive information about:

- ❖ The child's background
- ❖ The probable length of stay in the foster home
- ❖ What the plan is for the child's future
- ❖ What is expected of you as a foster parents

Things Foster Parents Need to Communicate With the Agency

Since you are with the child every day, you have important information that the case worker and birth family will probably want to know.

The child's case worker will want to know:

- ❖ The child's progress in addressing treatment needs or goals.
- ❖ Observations about the child's daily functioning, interactions with his or her birth family, including siblings, and any other important or relevant information.
- ❖ Positive information about the child, such as report card grades or a child's achievement in sports or school activities.

Licensing workers or foster care coordinators will want to know:

- ❖ Any changes in your family such as a person moving into or leaving the home.
- ❖ The child's or your family's potential community resource needs.
- ❖ Respite or substitute care needs.
- ❖ Errors in foster care payments.
- ❖ Plans to take the child on a trip or vacation out of town.
- ❖ Major physical damage to the foster home.
- ❖ Changes in your work schedule.
- ❖ Criminal activity by any resident in the foster home, including arrests or charges.
- ❖ Emergencies or special circumstances (this is explained in the next section).

Staying in Touch:

Because of a busy work schedule, it may be easier to reach the child's case worker at certain times more than others. This is often a common area of stress within the relationship between case workers and foster parents.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

- ❖ When first getting to know the case worker, it is a good idea to ask about when the best time to contact them is, where, and how (e-mail or phone message).
- ❖ It is also good idea for you to write down questions or issues as they occur and have them ready to discuss when you connect with the case worker.
- ❖ You may also to write the questions, information, or issues in the child's foster home record.

If you have questions about the child or what is going on with the child's case plan or permanency goals, the best thing to do is ask. The child's case worker may not be able to answer all of your questions, but he or she may be able to provide enough information to help you have better understanding of what is happening.

Remember: All communication regarding the child and the child's family must be kept CONFIDENTIAL.

MAINTAINING AND KEEPING RECORDS

Foster care licensing rules require that you keep a record for each child placed in your home. Keeping a record ensures case workers and birth parents have easy access to important information about how the child is doing; it also provides quick access to important information in case of an emergency.

Maintaining a record about a child is useful for many reasons. It helps keep the case worker and birth family up-to-date about the child, clarifies misunderstandings or miscommunications, and keeps track of appointments or services such as counseling, evaluations, or visits. By documenting these things, you are also creating a history of how you have handled various situations, and which techniques or interventions worked well and which did not. This information can be helpful in determining supplemental and exceptional rates, as well.

A foster parent's record about a child must include:

- ❖ The child's name, nickname, or other name he or she is called
- ❖ The date the child came and left the foster home
- ❖ The child's birth date
- ❖ Emergency contact information for significant people in the child's life including the child's doctor, dentist, social worker, and others
- ❖ Medical information, particularly about allergies, recent medical treatment, or serious medical conditions
- ❖ The school the child attends and his or her grades

Other documentation could also include:

- ❖ School reports and pictures
- ❖ Appointments or meetings
- ❖ Activities the child is involved in
- ❖ Progress notes or weekly summaries

Much of this information will be provided to you when a child is placed in your home. If a child is placed on an emergency basis or with little preparation, the agency may only supply you with limited information about the child. This information will be included on the Information to Foster Parents form, Part A, a 6-page form with basic information to help the foster parent safely care for the child.

Agencies are also required to provide more in-depth information about a child on the Information to Foster Parents form, Part B. This part of the form is much longer and contains a list of questions about the people who can visit the child, the child's siblings, the child's behaviors, any health conditions the child has, and much more. The agency is required to provide information about a child to the foster parent as soon as the information is known. If the agency does not have information at the time the child is placed, the agency must provide that additional information to the foster parent within 7 working days of the agency receiving it, or, if the information is of critical importance to the care of the child, the agency must provide the information to the foster parent within 3 working days.

You may receive a copy of the child's case plan, permanency plan, or other reports. You need to keep all records on the child together in the same place along with your notes about the child's progress as well as any other important information on the child.

During the time the child is in your home you should try to record factual and specific information about the child and activities the child is involved with rather than opinions or judgments about things that may have happened.

When the child leaves your home, you need to give the complete record to the case worker supervising the child's placement. Agency staff may request the child's record for inspection or review at any time.

For more information about case record documentation requirements in foster home licensing standards, see section 56.09 (11).

PAYMENTS AND REIMBURSEMENTS

You will be provided with payments that are intended to reimburse you for the cost of caring for the child placed in your home. All foster families receive a minimum amount of reimbursement, called the Basic Rate. You may also get additional reimbursement, called Supplemental and Exceptional Rates, based upon the needs of the child in your home. You have the ability to appeal the reimbursement rate if you think it does not match the needs of the child in your home.

Your foster care licensing agency will provide you with a copy of a brochure that explains the Uniform Foster Care Rate, reimbursement amounts, clothing allowances, and how to appeal the foster care rate. For more information about the Uniform Foster Care Rate, contact your Foster Care Coordinator or visit the Division of Children and Family Services' web site at <http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/children/foster/>

TRAINING AND CONTINUED LEARNING

In Wisconsin, training requirements for foster parents vary between agencies. Your foster care coordinator will give you information about the particular requirements for your licensing agency. Despite the differences that exist among agency training requirements, being a successful foster parent means continuing to learn – through classes, by reading books or magazines, from other foster parents, and more.

While you may have chosen to become a foster parent because of successful parenting of your birth children, foster children have lived under a different set of rules and may respond very differently to your parenting style than your birth children. You may feel helpless, frustrated, and ineffective with both yourself and the child for not following your directions. These reactions are normal.

It is important, however, to take a moment amid the frustration and confusion to identify your personal strengths and acknowledge areas of your parenting skills that may need improvement. Taking classes and talking with other foster parents can help you gain knowledge and skills to better work with the foster children in your care, to eliminate miscommunications, and to help your foster child be successful.

There are many opportunities both in your local communities and statewide for continued learning and growth as a foster parent. Additional training or advice coupled with your own practical experience and observation will benefit both you as a parent and the foster child in your home.

For more information about various books, videos and other trainings available check with your Foster Care Coordinator or the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center at wifostercareandadoption.org or 1-800-947-8074

EMERGENCIES AND SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

An emergency is a situation that occurs outside the normal responsibilities of foster parenting and demands immediate intervention or assistance. When a child is placed in your home, you should discuss with the case worker how emergencies – both during business hours and after hours – should be handled. Foster home licensing requirements list situations in which a foster parent must immediately, or within a certain period of time, contact the agency. Those situations include those explained below.

Serious Injury or Illness

If the child placed in your home is seriously injured or falls seriously ill and requires medical care, you must contact the case worker immediately. In the event of an emergency, you should take the child to the hospital emergency room first (take the child's medical form) and then notify the case worker, agency supervisor, or the on call worker (after hours) as soon as possible.

If a child requires surgery, consent for surgery must be signed by the child's legal guardian. In most cases that will be the child's parents. As mentioned before, the case worker is responsible for getting any consents or releases regarding the child's care.

Reporting Maltreatment

If you notice that the child has suspicious marks, injuries, or bruises or indicates that she or he has been touched inappropriately, it is critical for you to call the case worker or on-call worker immediately to report that information. You are required by licensing standards to notify the supervising agency if you believe that a child in foster care has been abused or neglected, has been threatened with abuse or neglect, or think it is likely that a child will be abused or neglected. This includes any child in foster care you interact with, not just the children placed in your home.

Refer to Ch. HFS 56.05(1) (c) (6) for more information about licensing requirements related to foster parents reporting suspected child abuse or neglect.

Run Away or Failure to Return to the Foster Home

You must report when a child goes missing from your home or if the child has been missing for a period of time that cannot be reasonably explained. For some children with disabilities or special needs, being missing for any period of time may be cause for immediate action.

If the child leaves without permission or does not return as planned, you need to call the child's case worker or the on-call worker. The case worker will work with you to decide the next steps.

Other situations:

At times the behavior of children in foster care or the circumstances that you may encounter as a foster parent are unique and complicated. In this book we have tried to outline the major areas that are considered emergency circumstances. Below we have indicated a few more remember when in doubt about any situation consult the agency as soon as possible.

Other situations requiring immediate attention include:

- ❖ A child in foster care having problems with law enforcement - either arrest or criminal behavior in the community
- ❖ Problems associated with a family interaction plan
- ❖ A child who is expelled or suspended from school
- ❖ A child threatens to harm him or herself or others
- ❖ Other situation specific to the child or identified by the agency

IF AT ANY TIME YOU FEEL THAT THERE IS A DANGER THAT A CHILD IN FOSTER CARE OR ANYONE ELSE IN THE HOME MAY CAUSE PHYSICAL VIOLENCE OR SERIOUS PROPERTY DAMAGE LAW ENFORCEMENT (911) SHOULD BE CONTACTED IMMEDIATELY.

For more information about when foster parents are required to report information to the agency, refer to 56.05(c) 5 – 7.

ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT

There are many reasons foster homes are reported for allegations of child abuse or neglect at higher rates than the general public. The substantiation rate of those allegations, however, is much lower than the general public which means that of the many foster parents who are reported to have abused or neglected children, not very many are found to have actually done so.

As a foster parent you have an obligation to assure the safety of the children in your home. It is the responsibility of the agency or tribe to make sure you are providing a safe environment for children. The agency or tribe has a duty to assess and investigate allegations of maltreatment against children living in your home. If the agency determines an investigation is not necessary, the situation may be addressed in the same way as a general concern or licensing violation.

In Wisconsin, foster care licensing agencies must have a policy that describes what actions they take when an allegation of child abuse or neglect is made against a foster home. You should refer to the agency's policy to learn more about the steps of the investigation process. You will also be provided with information about your appeal rights should a substantiated finding or foster home license revocation occur.

Safeguards to Consider

While there is no guaranteed way to avoid an allegation of child abuse or neglect, there are ways to minimize the risk of allegations. You will want to consider the following suggestions.

Suggestions for minimizing the risk of an allegation:

- ❖ Find out as much information as possible before deciding whether to take a placement, including the child's abuse history both at home and in out of home placements (including unsubstantiated allegations of abuse).
- ❖ Do not accept placement of any child you do not feel confident you can adequately parent
- ❖ Work with the agency and as appropriate tribe to ensure that the child's needs are identified and met
- ❖ Understand and follow all laws and regulations on caring for foster children
- ❖ Develop family rules and expectations and ensure that all family members follow them
Rules might include:
 - Always being clothed in common areas of the home
 - Restricting the foster parents' bedroom to foster parents only
 - Not giving frontal hugs to children with histories of sexual abuse.
- ❖ Do not leave a child who has been sexually abused alone with anyone of the same gender as the person who abused the child
- ❖ Provide a **HIGH** level of supervision for a foster child who demonstrates or has a prior history of sexualized behaviors
- ❖ Keep a daily log and record any unusual events, behaviors, comments, reactions before or after interaction with family members; school issues; medical, dental, or therapy appointments; and all discussions with other professionals about the child's progress and needs (including social workers, attorneys, mental health professions, etc.)
- ❖ Promptly report any unusual incident or injury to the child's agency/tribal worker
- ❖ Maintain a professional working relationship with the child's parents, case workers, and other professionals involved with the child.
- ❖ Participate in training for foster and adoptive parents on caring for children who have been abused or neglected

Coping with Maltreatment Allegations

Going through an allegation and investigation of child abuse or neglect is a very difficult, emotional, and challenging experience. Having access to other foster parents who have experienced an allegation and have successfully managed the situation is invaluable to foster parents during the allegation investigation process.

During the investigation process foster parents should try to:

- ❖ Maintain a professional attitude
- ❖ Stay focused on understanding and following the procedures in place to resolve the maltreatment report
- ❖ Maintain or start a log of every conversation or activity related to the investigation, including the person calling and the agency they work for
- ❖ Ask for all documents such as a copy of the complaint or report of abuse and the safety plan established for the child.
- ❖ Read documents carefully and ask questions about anything you do not understand.
- ❖ Keep track of timelines for the investigation
- ❖ Provide information and documentation to the agency about the event that caused the report to be made
- ❖ Reach out to local foster care support groups/ associations and ask for support and assistance
- ❖ Request that the child welfare agency provide at least one contact person in the agency to provide basic information about the investigation process
- ❖ Maintain the family routine; do not isolate yourself from friends and family

Remember that child maltreatment allegations against foster parents are often found to be unsubstantiated.

For more information about child maltreatment reports and investigations concerning foster parents talk with your foster care coordinator; refer to the National Foster Parent Association at www.nfpainc.org or 1-800-557-5238; or contact the Wisconsin Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center at wifostercareandadoption.org or 1-800-947-8074

OTHER CONCERNS THAT MAY BE RAISED

Foster parenting is demanding and complicated and it is not unusual for challenges to occur. You need to know that, at some point, concerns or complaints may come to the attention of the agency or tribe and need to be addressed. There are various ways an agency or tribe can handle negative information about a foster family, depending on the information provided and the particular procedures of the agency or tribe. The following provides a general guideline to help you understand how various concerns will be handled.

General Concerns – How They Are Typically Handled

There may be times when someone within or outside of the licensing agency or tribe may have concerns about a particular incident, behavior, or decision you have made. The information provided or observed may not be something that would rise to the level of abuse or neglect or a licensing violation but it may be something that the agency or tribe needs to clarify and address.

Some examples may be that the child is not appropriately dressed for school or that you made a comment that someone perceived to be inappropriate to the child. It may also be that you are having challenges with following through with setting up appointments or returning phone calls or paperwork.

When a general concern is raised, it is most likely the case worker for the child who will talk with you in person or by phone to let you know if something needs to be corrected. The worker may provide suggestions or recommend training.

Addressing concerns with one another is part of building a relationship between you and the case worker. It is also part of you gaining insight and building skills to care for children. It is important to be willing to listen to the concern, provide clarification, and accept the worker's recommendations if something needs to be changed.

Licensing Concerns – How They Are Typically Handled

Licensing investigations may occur in response to complaints or concerns about licensing violations in the foster home. It may have to do with the physical requirements of the home, sleeping arrangements, general care of children in foster care, or other requirements. Alleged licensing violations are generally addressed by the foster care coordinator, who may observe the violation during a home visit or who may come to the home to specifically address the licensing violation.

Things that might occur if licensing rules are violated

- ❖ The agency may determine that you can maintain your license if you bring the home into compliance or correct the violation. The violation and corrective actions should be documented in the foster home file and a copy provided to the foster parents.
- ❖ Verbally or in writing, the foster care coordinator will provide instructions to you on how to correct the violation.
- ❖ The agency may determine that, due to the severity of the violation, number of violations, or inability or unwillingness to correct the violation, that your license will be revoked.
- ❖ If a revocation occurs, you will be provided written information about the basis for revocation and the appeal process, as included in 56.10.

Here are some tips for understanding and following foster care licensing requirements:

- ❖ Keep a current copy of foster care licensing laws and regulations on hand and become familiar with it.
- ❖ Request information in writing about agency procedures and how licensing violations are handled.
- ❖ Work with agency or tribe to settle any licensing concerns.
- ❖ Immediately comply with any corrective action plan to resolve problem(s).
- ❖ Provide the agency or tribe with documentation in writing that the violation has been eliminated.

GRIEVANCES AND APPEALS

Filing a Grievance

Agencies are required to have policies that outline how anyone involved with child welfare services – including foster parents – can address their concerns, complaints, or grievances with their agency. Typically, agency grievance procedures require an individual to first address their concerns with the case worker or staff person directly. If talking with the case worker or supervisor doesn't address the person's complaints, the next step is usually to send information in writing to the agency. You can request a copy of your agency's grievance procedure from administrative staff, their caseworker, or other agency staff.

Try to be specific when expressing a concern or filing a grievance with the agency. The agency can best address a concern when they have specific information about what happened and why you feel it is a problem.

Appealing a Decision

You have the ability to appeal decisions about their license and decisions related to the child in their home. Agencies should notify you of your ability to appeal decisions at the time the agency sends you notice of their decision or action. For example, if an agency revokes a foster home license, the agency should send the foster parent a letter stating why the foster home license is revoked, how a foster parent can appeal the decision, and the time in which the foster parent can appeal the decision.

To appeal a decision, you should follow the written instructions provided by the agency, paying close attention to any time limit given for the appeal. To file an appeal, send a written request to the following agency:

Division of Hearings and Appeals (DHA)
P.O. Box 7875
Madison, WI 53707-7875

This appeal process is for decisions made about a foster parent's license and decisions that are made about children in the care of foster parents. **The process for appealing a substantiation of child abuse or neglect is a separate procedure.**

For more information about what a foster parent can appeal and the procedures for requesting an appeal, refer to section 56.10.

REQUESTS FOR REMOVAL OF A CHILD

There may be situations in which either you or the agency or tribe makes a decision that the child needs to be moved from your home. This section presents information about how both agencies and foster parents should proceed if a decision is made to move a foster child, commonly called "giving notice."

The foster family responsibility:

You are required to provide an agency with 30 days notice when you request a child be removed from your home. This is very important so that a new plan can be made and that plan explained to the child before the child moves. You need to help with these preparations to ease any anxiety or confusion the child may have. If the situation is very difficult, you may request that the agency move the child before 30 days, but the agency may not always be able to find an appropriate home in a shorter time period.

The agency responsibility:

If the agency plans to remove the child, the agency is required by law to give a 30-day written notice prior to removing the child when the child has been in the foster home for at least 6 months. This requirement does not apply if the child has been in your home for less than 6 months or in situations when the agency has determined that the child is not safe.

You may appeal the agency's decision if the foster child has been in your home for more than 6 months. When the agency notifies you of their intent to move the child, the notice should include information about how you can appeal the decision.

If the safety of the child is not in jeopardy and you have appealed the agency's decision to remove the child, removal cannot be carried out until the fair hearing is held and a ruling is made.

These rights apply only when the decision to remove the child is made by the agency. The county circuit court may order such removal without 30-day notice and with no recourse for appealing this action.

FOSTER PARENT INSURANCE PROGRAM

As required in s. 56.04(4)(a)9.b., Adm. Code, licensing agencies must provide all foster parent applicants with a brochure that explains the Foster Parent Insurance Program. Foster parents are required to have homeowner's or renter's insurance as stated in s. 56.04(4)(a)2. Adm. Rule; however, sometimes homeowner's insurance may not cover certain damages. The Foster, Treatment Foster and Family-Operated Group Home Insurance Program was established in s. 48.627, Stats. to help reimburse a foster family's damage or loss caused by foster children that is not covered by private insurance.

It is very important to contact your licensing worker right away after your family experiences loss or damage caused by a foster child, either on purpose or by accident. Taking pictures is a good idea, too, to show proof of the damage.

The Foster Parent Insurance program brochure explains further details of the program. To obtain a copy of the brochure, contact your licensing worker or the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center.

Chapter 2- Key Points:

- ❖ **Foster Parents MUST respect the confidentiality of children in foster care and their families.**
- ❖ **Open and ongoing communication between you, the child's case worker, birth parents and any other professionals involved with children placed in your home is important to the success of the child and their family.**
- ❖ **You are required to keep a record for each child placed in your home.**
- ❖ **Refer to the Uniform Rate Brochure and your Foster Care Coordinator regarding questions about foster parent reimbursement.**
- ❖ **Discuss with the child's case worker and your foster care coordinator about how emergencies – both during business hours and after hours – should be handled.**
- ❖ **Remember for many reasons, foster homes are reported for allegations of child abuse or neglect at higher rates than the general public. The substantiation rate of those allegations, however, is much lower than the general public**
- ❖ **There is no guaranteed way to avoid an allegation of child abuse or neglect, but there are ways to minimize the risk of allegations.**
- ❖ **At some point, concerns or complaints may come to the attention of the agency or tribe that need to be addressed.**
- ❖ **Your agency is required to have policies that outline how you can address your concerns, complaints, or grievances with the agency.**
- ❖ **You have the ability to appeal decisions about your license and decisions related to the child in their home.**
- ❖ **You are required to provide an agency with 30 days notice when you request a child be removed from your home.**
- ❖ **Wisconsin has a Foster Parent Insurance program, refer to the brochure provided in the Appendix for more detail and consult your Foster Care Coordinator.**